

University of Portland  
**Pilot Scholars**

---

Honors Projects

Honors Program

---

12-11-2020

## Gay Voices in Coming Out: Diverse Representation as an Antidote to Homophobia in the GDR

Ruby Lindgren

Follow this and additional works at: [https://pilotscholars.up.edu/hon\\_projects](https://pilotscholars.up.edu/hon_projects)



Part of the [European History Commons](#), [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Studies Commons](#), [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#), [Politics and Social Change Commons](#), [Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons](#), and the [Sociology of Culture Commons](#)

---

### Citation: Pilot Scholars Version (Modified MLA Style)

Lindgren, Ruby, "Gay Voices in Coming Out: Diverse Representation as an Antidote to Homophobia in the GDR" (2020). *Honors Projects*. 28.

[https://pilotscholars.up.edu/hon\\_projects/28](https://pilotscholars.up.edu/hon_projects/28)

This Project is brought to you for free and open access by the Honors Program at Pilot Scholars. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Projects by an authorized administrator of Pilot Scholars. For more information, please contact [library@up.edu](mailto:library@up.edu).

Ruby Lindgren

Dr. Hill

GRM 411H

11. December 2020

### Gay Voices in *Coming Out*: Diverse Representation as an Antidote to Homophobia in the GDR

November 9, 1989 was a night of breaking down barriers in the German Democratic Republic. Immortalized as the night of the *Mauerfall*, the events of that date brought great freedom and relief to East Germans. Less well known, but also groundbreaking, was the film that premiered that night, *Coming Out*. Directed by Heiner Carow, this film was the first within the highly censored Deutsche Film-Atkiengesellschaft (DEFA) to depict homosexuality. While homosexual activity was not a criminal offence for adults in the GDR, there was a still a strong taboo associated with the subject, and the state consistently disrupted attempts by gay and lesbian liberation groups to improve conditions for the LGBTQ+ community. Production of this film was a rare opportunity to appeal to a wider GDR audience and show, in a very personal way, what it was like to be gay. Where Carow could have used this opportunity to fall back on gay stereotypes for cheap entertainment, he instead chose to represent gay culture in a multifaceted and authentic way. While centering the action of the film around a single homosexual character, Carow also peppered the film with a myriad of other LGBTQ+ characters, all with different personalities and life experiences. He gives voice and depth to these characters through four brief but memorable monologues that express various elements of queer experience. Meanwhile, he also gives the audience a good understanding of gay culture through an accurate

depiction of East Germany's gay bar scene of the 1980s. In this paper, I will analyze these two elements of the film, arguing that *Coming Out* actively addresses and repudiates East German stereotypes of homosexuality through a portrayal of a wide variety of LGBTQ+ characters.

### Background History

Legal discrimination and cultural stigmatization of homosexuality existed in Germany far before the GDR came into existence. During the period before the first World War, Germany's *Strafgesetzbuch* adopted Paragraph 175, which specifically criminalized sexual contact between men (Davidson-Schmich 535). While the *Wissenschaftlich-humanitäres Komitee* contested this policy, they succeeded only in preventing it from including women (536). The policy was expanded under the Nazis, who "broadened the scope of Paragraph 175 to criminalize not only physical sexual acts but also the intent to engage in them. Moreover, punishments were increased to include up to 10 years in prison" (536). Life in the concentration camps was particularly horrible for those convicted of homosexuality because, as Geoffrey J. Giles explains, "the pink triangle on your sleeve sent you to the bottom of the camp hierarchy" (Lemke 13). This meant that they were "capriciously picked on, made the victims of cruel medical experiments, or deliberately worked to death," with very few homosexual prisoners surviving to the end of the war (13).

Meanwhile, homosexuality was also condemned by antifascists, who believed same-gender desire to be associated with—or even the cause of—fascism (Dennis 59-60). David Brandon Dennis writes that "in the wake of revelations about Nazi SA chief Ernst Röhm's sexual preference for the men under his command, left-wing journalists and thinkers like Wilhelm Reich began crafting a powerful and lasting association between fascism and homosexuality"

(59). Röhm also served to cement the stereotype of the *Jugendverführer*, or “seducer of youths” (59). These two preconceptions were very influential in the GDR, which strove to be as antifascist as possible.

After the war ended and the divided German nations were founded, the East and the West each incorporated some version of the previous Paragraph 175 into their new penal codes. The GDR “developed a completely new criminal code to replace the one it had inherited from past regimes; the old Paragraph 175 was replaced by a new Paragraph 151, which forbade male and female minors, but not adults, from engaging in same-sex relations” (Davidson-Schmich 536). Therefore, homosexuality—including homosexual activity—was completely legal for everyone except minors in the East. Meanwhile, in the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), Paragraph 175 was retained in its entirety—Nazi revisions and all. Further, “some people who had been convicted of homosexuality under the Nazis were returned to former concentration camps to finish out their sentences” (537).

The first politically-engaged gay liberation group to develop in East Germany—and in fact, in all of Eastern Europe—was the *Homosexuelle Interessengemeinschaft Berlin*, or HIB (McLellan 105). Founded by Michael Egger and Peter Rausch, this group met in transgender activist Charlotte von Mahlsdorf’s Museum and aimed to foster “community, openness, and engagement with the state” (120). Their political activity consisted of letter writing, film-producing, and disruption of public events, and they also prioritized community building events such as cabaret evenings, parties, and gatherings on Whitsun weekend (121). After an effort to hold a “GDR-wide meeting of lesbians” was disrupted by the police, Mahlsdorf “was banned from holding regular events at her museum, and it proved impossible to find another suitable venue” (123-4). The HIB dissolved itself in September of 1979, after a disheartening meeting

with officials from the Council of Ministers appeared to designate a dead-end for the movement (124). On the contrary, the work of the HIB in the 1970s paved the way for more expansive gay rights movements in the 1980s, especially in the Protestant Church.

These movements were only in a position to form because of an agreement that took place in 1978 between the Protestant Church and the state (Dennis 63). This agreement created “a semi-autonomous public sphere within the churches,” within which politically active “homosexual working groups” gathered to strive for LGBTQ+ equality (58, 63). By the late 1980s, their hard work paid off with the topic’s entrance into more mainstream discussions (65). Then, in August of 1987, the GDR Supreme Court decided that “homosexuals had to be treated exactly like heterosexuals with regard to sexual relations. Only if harm or nonconsensuality were proved could an adult man be convicted of a sex crime” (Lemke 6). A year later, Paragraph 151 was removed completely (Davidson-Schmich 536).

With the GDR’s attitude toward sexuality being what it was, it may come as no surprise that *Coming Out* is the only DEFA film that touches on the topic of homosexuality. It wasn’t ever supposed to be made in the first place: Heiner Carow’s first pitch for the film was unequivocally shut down by DEFA’s director, Hans Dieter Mäde. Not to be deterred, Carow and Wolfram Witt proceeded to write the screenplay and sent it over Mäde’s head to Kurt Hager, “along with letters of support from a psychiatrist, a sociologist, and a legal scholar” (Dennis 68-9). With Hager’s approval, Carow was able to commence production on the project (69).

### Plot Summary

*Coming Out* follows protagonist Philipp Klarmann as he gradually comes to terms with his sexual orientation. When the film begins, Philipp is happily working as a schoolteacher in the

GDR. He falls in love (or at least appears to) with his colleague, Tanja, and the two become a couple. Everything changes, however, when Philipp sees his old sweetheart, Jacob. Conflicted and confused, Philipp increasingly distances himself from Tanja and starts going to gay bars, where he meets the young Matthias. They have an affair, but it isn't long before Matthias and Tanja find out about each other and Philipp loses both. At the end of the movie, it is clear that Philipp will face increased difficulties because of his sexuality, but he will go forward having finally embraced his identity.<sup>1</sup>

### Monologues

The following monologues are significant because they offer an opportunity for the LGBTQ+ characters in the film to speak for themselves. Three out of four of the conversations take place in a queer context, where no heterosexual person is clearly present. Without fear of the heterosexual gaze, these characters have the freedom to speak honestly of their experiences. Meanwhile, the audience is given the privilege of witnessing these conversations that would normally happen behind closed doors. Cleverly, Philipp is positioned as a new and inexperienced member of the community, which prompts more experienced members to offer him advice and inform him of various elements of queer culture and experience. Through these very vulnerable conversations, the audience learns what it is like to be queer *from a queer point of view*.

Though these revelations start out hopeful, they ultimately reveal harsh realities of the unjust treatment queer people face as a result of their non-heteronormativity. Charlotte's lighthearted story about trying on a ballgown for the first time is followed by Jacob's distressed description of how he was blamed for seducing Philipp. And Philipp's own defiant defense of his

---

<sup>1</sup> See Kyle Frackman's article, "The East German Film *Coming Out* (1989) as Melancholic Reflection and Hopeful Projection," for a more detailed interpretation of the film's final scene.

identity is quickly overshadowed by his strong anxieties of being a homosexual teacher and Walter's climactic story of the persecution he experienced under the Nazis. These stories, powerfully told from a first-person perspective, inform the audience of the obstacles facing queer people and make a strong case that things need to change.

## I. Charlotte

The very first monologue comes from the lips of Charlotte von Mahlsdorf, the famous transgender activist who cameos as a bartender in this film. Shortly before this scene, Philipp meets Tanja's friend "Redford," who is none other than Philipp's old flame, Jacob Schrader. Suddenly forced to confront his homosexuality, Philipp gets drunk and stumbles upon a gay bar. This is where he meets Charlotte, who tells him this story:

Gleichfalls als ich fünfzehn war hab' ich mein erstes Ballkleid getragen. Das hab' ich entdeckt bei meinen Großanten in einem alten Schrank auf'm Boden. Mir das Ding angezogen und dann vor den Spiegel gestellt im Salon. Und meine Tante, die eigentlich Landwirtin war und immer nur Männersachen trug, was ich aber damals noch nicht wusste, dass sie auch eigentlich lesbisch war. Die kamen dann plötzlich in das Zimmer und sagte, "Was hast du denn hier an?" Und dann sagte ich, "ein Ballkleid." Und dann kam sie auf mich zu und sagt' "Siehste mit uns beiden hat die Natur einen Scherz gemacht. Du hättest ein Mädchen werden müssen und ich ein Mann!" (*Coming Out* 34:00-34:40)

This story is based on Charlotte's autobiographical experience as a transgender woman. In an interview with Jürgen Lemke in 1986, she tells this almost identical tale:

At fifteen I discovered the most magnificent treasures in a room on my great aunt Luise's estate in what was then East Prussia. Old costumes, ball gowns, extremely tailored women's riding outfits. To my great joy, the things fit me as if they had been made just for me. [...] During the entire vacation I dragged about in her old clothes. (Lemke 70)

Including this piece of Charlotte's story in the film is an impressive feat of transgender representation, which generally lags far behind representation of homosexuality. Further, the

story is lighthearted, joking that her gender identity and that of her great aunt were the result of “ein Scherz” of nature. It is a story of familial acceptance, and therefore, of hope.

This monologue’s placement in the film is also thematically important. Philipp has just begun his journey of self-discovery and is completely in denial about his identity. Charlotte’s story tells of a similar moment in her journey, and models for Philipp how it can be a joy to figure out who you are.

However, what *Coming Out* doesn’t show is the discrimination Charlotte faced, even from within the queer community. She relates that “among homosexuals, we transvestites are treated in a variety of ways. In a bar it sometimes happens that I am hissed at: ‘Stupid old thing, get lost, sit down someplace else.’ To that I just nod in a friendly way and sit at a different table” (Lemke 78). Her inclusion in a film that centers around gay men is an act of defiance against transphobia in the GDR.

## II. Jacob

In the next scene, Philipp goes to visit Jacob without telling Tanja. He is met at the door by Jacob’s partner, and all three men sit down to talk. Philipp asks Jacob whether he has told Tanja anything, to which Jacob replies “Deshalb bist du gekommen. Du hast dich doch kein bisschen geändert, schade. Es ist dir heute noch genau so peinlich wie damals.” They start to argue, at which point Jacob’s partner begins to leave and Jacob says, “Komm, bleib hier. Wir haben keine Geheimnisse voreinander. Wir leben zusammen. Wir brauchen uns davor nicht zu schämen. Vor niemandem, ist das klar?”. Angry, he continues:

Du meinst das anders. Du hast das schon damals anders gemeint. Du hast mich nicht im Stich gelassen? Es ist nicht wahr, dass du mit mir in der Klasse bleiben wolltest? Du bist nicht krank geworden wegen des Ekels vor mir? Du hast nicht deine Eltern zu mir geschickt, peinlich, peinlich Sie haben unseren Sohn zu homosexueller Handlung



verführt... Und du weißt doch nicht...nicht dass deine Eltern mir das Fahrrad geschenkt haben und den Zirkelkasten als...als Ersatz für dich. Und weil wir doch zu Hause so viele Kinder waren und weil meiner Eltern nicht so—. (*Coming Out* 40:00-43:00)

Jacob gets cut off when Philipp, upset, runs away from the conversation.

This scene serves a few purposes. First, it sheds a little bit more light on Philipp and Jacob's mysterious past together, confirming that the two had been romantically involved while in school. The previous scene introducing us to Jacob was the first clear indication to the audience that something may have occurred between them, but it left things very ambiguous. Second, this scene contains what is perhaps the clearest demonstration of Philipp's internalized homophobia. In insisting that his feelings are "überhaupt nicht wahr" and demonstrating a gross inability to take responsibility for what happened, he shows that he has not yet come to terms with either his sexual orientation or the past. When Jacob confronts him with the consequences of his actions, he quite literally runs away.

Meanwhile, this scene also shows us an example of a functioning gay relationship. Although we don't know much about Jacob and his partner, the few interactions we witness show us that the two treat each other with mutual respect and trust. When the conversation between Jacob and Philipp starts to get intense, Jacob's partner politely begins to excuse himself. But Jacob insists that he should stay, because "Wir haben keine Geheimnisse voreinander." Where other parts of the film highlight gay hookup culture, this scene shows that one does not have to be heterosexual (or fake heterosexuality) to have a committed and contented home life. This concept may have been novel to both Philipp and the audience in the GDR. Were Philipp a little farther along in his journey of self-acceptance, he may have found this situation hopeful, as someone who appears to desire a romantic connection with someone. This presents a possible

future for him, one in which he could be proud of his identity and settle down with a man he loves.

Most importantly, this scene acknowledges and disputes a prevailing attitude towards homosexuality at the time, best termed the “seduction hypothesis” (Frackman 456). This was the idea that older gay men could seduce younger men, changing their sexual orientation and dooming them to a life of crime and sadness (455-6). Although Philipp and Jacob appear to be of similar ages, it is evident that this concept was at play in the condemnation of their relationship. Jacob explains that Philipp’s parents came to see him, accusing him of inciting Philipp to engage in homosexual acts and offering him a bicycle and a compass set as a replacement for Philipp. Meanwhile, Philipp benefitted from this stereotype, by being cast as the innocent heterosexual victim of Jacob’s advances. But Jacob’s words show the audience the consequences of this popular fallacy. As a character, he shows no sign of being creepy or predatory, just a normal ex-boyfriend who has had his heart broken. Yet he was left with both the pain of the breakup and, unfairly, blame for “seducing” Philipp.

### III. Philipp

The next monologue occurs near the end of the film and is delivered by our protagonist, Philipp. He is much farther along in his journey, having had his affair with Matthias. His mother comes to visit him at his school, and the two take a walk together in a park, conversing about his sexuality. When his mother asks him, “Warum muss das so sein?”, Philipp responds:

Weil es nicht anders geht. Und warum muss das sein, dass ich mich deshalb rechtfertigen muss? Warum muss das sein? Ist es besser, wenn man sich verstellt? Sich belügt? Irgendwas erzwingen will? Was man nicht erzwingen kann? Andere unglücklich machen, weil man keine andere Chance hat? Weil die Natur einen so angerichtet hat und nicht anders? Wem schadet man denn? Außer dem so-genannten guten Ruf? Hat nicht jeder das Recht so zu leben, wie er leben muss? (*Coming Out* 1:25:24-1:27:23)

His mother, crying, says that she doesn't know how to help him, but soon turns on him when he brings up her relationship with his father and says he only ever wanted them to be happy.

Running away, she says, "Unglücklich? Unglücklich bin ich nur wegen dir. Nur wegen dir!".

This is an enormous moment for Philipp, who has been vehemently denying his identity the entire film. Not only has he finally come to terms with himself, but he is also questioning the system which forces him to have to justify himself to those around him. He emphasizes the immutable nature of the matter, extrapolating on Charlotte's story to assert that gender identity and sexual orientation are assigned by Nature and are outside of human control.

This monologue is a powerful exhortation to the GDR to promote greater rights and acceptance for the LGBTQ+ community. In fact, Philipp's mother could easily represent the GDR in this moment, with her egregious expectations of Philipp, thinly veiled homophobia, and oscillation between wanting to help him and blaming him for her unhappiness. Speaking to her, and by extension, the East German audience, Philipp challenges the heterosexual norm with his question: "Hat nicht jeder das Recht so zu leben, wie er leben muss?".

#### IV. Walter

The fourth and last monologue occurs in the same gay bar as the first, but the mood has drastically changed. Philipp may have delivered a strong defense of his identity to his mother, but his actions throughout the film have left him with an uncomfortable set of circumstances. In addition to having lost his chance at a "respectable" life with Tanja, he has just been rejected by a heartbroken Matthias and accidentally outed himself to his student, Lutz, in the process. Heartbroken and scared, he runs around the bar in a desperate frenzy, inserting himself into conversations and disrupting a drag performance. Walter, a kind old man who has been present

throughout the film, steps in to prevent him from embarrassing himself further, and Philipp attacks him, yelling “Fass mich nicht an, du alter Bock!” Achim, the waiter, wants to throw Philipp out, but Walter defends him, saying it was a “Missverständnis.” After ordering drinks, Walter patiently listens to a sobbing Philip, who expresses his fear at his situation: “Ich habe Angst. Wahnsinnige Angst. Ich bin Lehrer und ich bin gern Lehrer. Weißt du was es heißt? Lehrer—und schwul?” Walter replies, “Es gibt Schlimmeres.” With a tray full of shots in front of him, he begins his story:

Ich habe dafür zahlen müssen, wenn ich hier mit dir Schnaps trinke und warte. Warte wie alle hier, auf einen Mann der einem zulächelt. Ehrlich, liebevoll, zärtlich. So einfach ist das heute. Einmal...einmal nur gab es für mich die große Liebe. Das ist fünfzig Jahre her. Er hieß Karl. Ich war zwanzig, er war acht Jahre älter. Hatten ein raffiniertes System, uns zu tarnen. Eines Nachts, es besohlt es nicht mehr [ich weiß nicht] wer uns denunziert hat. Haben uns aus dem Zelte rausgezerrt, verhaftet, abtransportiert. Berlin, Dircksenstraße, Gestapo, im Alex eingesperrt. Karl und ich streng isoliert. Einzelhaft. Ich kam ins KZ. Sachsenhausen. Rosa Winkel, letzter Abschaum. Aber da bin ich in die KP [kommunistische Partei] eingetreten. Die Kameraden haben mich gerettet. Dann war ich Aktivist der ersten Stunde. Wir haben gearbeitet wie besessen. Und haben die Ausbeutung der Menschen durch Menschen abgeschafft. Und euch ist es scheißegal, ob einer der neben dir arbeitet Jude ist oder sonst was. Bloß die Schwulen—die haben wir vergessen. (*Coming Out* 1:39:20-1:42:40)

Walter’s delivery of this monologue is quite memorable—not just for the hefty story he tells, but also for the way he tells it. Every few lines, he pauses to take a shot of brandy, working his way through nine drinks in just a few minutes (1:42:37). Additionally, his and Philipp’s somber mood is in stark contrast to many of the people in the background, who continue to dance to upbeat music.

Philipp may not know it, but he is lucky to be a witness to this story. So few people convicted of homosexuality under the Nazis survived, that Geoffrey J. Giles describes any surviving testimonies as “utterly extraordinary” (Lemke 13).

To the East German audience, this story may also have been shocking. As late as 1989, gay and lesbian activist groups were still struggling for state recognition of LGBTQ+ persecution under the Nazis (Dennis 74). Walter's testimony also counters the antifascist narrative of the fascist homosexual, revealing his experience as a "dual [victim] of Nazi brutality and antifascist prejudice" (60). While praising the hard-won social achievements of the communist party, he also challenges the current regime, accusing them of forgetting about gay people.

This scene also completely debunks the *Jugendverführer* stereotype. As a gay man in his seventies, Walter would appear to fit the bill perfectly—and Philipp evidently thinks so too, based on his reaction to Walter's attempted help. After being insulted and attacked, Walter asks Philipp: "Glaubst du eigentlich, dass wir jeden Mann, dem wir etwas näher kommen gleich an die Hose wollen, weil wir Schwulen sind? Oder könnten wir vielleicht nicht nur hilfsbereit und menschlich sein wollen wie andere Leute auch?" (*Coming Out* 1:37:28). This question is directed not only at Philipp, but at every audience member who believes that a homosexual attraction to men in general equates to a universal attraction to *all* men. Walter repeatedly shows himself to be a kind person and a good friend throughout the movie, with no signs of trying to "seduce" anyone.

Also of importance are Philipp's expressed fears of being a gay as a teacher. They are not unfounded, as we discover in the very next scene, where Philipp is subjected to an unannounced observation by administrators at the school. Indeed, one gay man in the GDR affirmed that being gay was harder for teachers: "As a simple worker I haven't had any problems because of my sexual orientation. Of course, if I tried to qualify as a teacher I might run into discrimination. People like me seduce their young students—that's what people think" (Lemke 56). The fact that

Philipp was created to be a teacher was no accident. Carow doubtlessly chose his profession purposefully, to show how non-threatening a gay teacher really is.

### Gay Bars

The other way in which the film manages to display a remarkable amount of diversity is through the scenes that take place at the gay bar. The site of two of the above monologues, this location and the characters within serve to teach Philipp and the audience about gay culture in the GDR. The first night Philipp stumbles into the bar, insisting he is only there for cigarettes, everyone is dressed up in elaborate costumes, many in drag (30:18-37:50). Everyone is welcoming to the overwhelmed Philipp—making sure he has a seat, offering him a cigarette and a drink, and comforting him. Achim, the waiter, tells him: “Musst keine Angst haben. Jeder hat mal so angefangen. Hab Mut” (*Coming Out* 32:05). We see the bar as if from Philipp’s perspective, watching the various people interacting around him. The majority are young male couples, with the occasional single person. A lesbian woman also barrels through, comedically proclaiming: “Es gibt keine Weiber mehr! Und sagen die Weiber, [es] gibt keine Kerle! Und ich sage, es gibt überhaupt keine Weiber mehr!” (36:06). Philipp drinks too much and has to be carried home by Walter and Matthias.

The other prolonged scene that takes place in this setting occurs near the end of the movie when Walter delivers his monologue (1:34:45-1:42:45). Philipp’s character has changed, but the mood of the bar itself is also quite different. While many of the people carry on as usual with dancing, music, and kissing, the sparkling façade of the bar is gone. Without costumes, the people no longer look so uniformly young and beautifully adorned. They are also no longer so accommodating for Philipp, whose behavior has become intrusive and impetuous. Even before

he attacks Walter he was not the picture of a respectful bar-goer, encroaching on private conversations and stealing someone's cigarette (1:35:59). When Walter begins his story, the camera cuts to more melancholy scenes, of older men smoking and drinking alone and a drag queen wearily taking off her wig and earrings. We witness a different, more lonely side of gay culture, in which life is difficult and companionship hard to come by. Achim summarizes this sullen atmosphere with these comments: "Hier weiß keiner wie der andere heißt und wo wohnt. Ist jeder allein. Und jeder hat Angst" (1:22:40).

This multifaceted depiction of the gay bar scene is reflective of the reality of the time.

Bert, who moved from Thüringen to Berlin as a young man, says this of his experience:

At first I was dazzled by what I saw. People came in, went from table to table, greeted someone with "hello," someone else with a kiss. It was so incredible, everything seemed so natural. Like one big family that sticks together, no mean words, and people called each other names I had never heard before. [...] I realized that most of the people were my age. Oh, I thought, here's where you'll make friends. [...] This is your place. (Lemke 52).

After a few one-night stands, however, he saw the atmosphere through different eyes: "The whole bar scene is at best a place to have a good time. It's totally superficial. Whoever hangs out there for a long time automatically gets hurt" (52). This movement from amazement to disillusionment is captured perfectly in the film, which portrays both the fun and the lonely sides of gay culture.

The coexistence of these two realms is most explicitly juxtaposed during Philipp's conversation with Walter (*Coming Out* 1:37:57-1:38:48). Philipp is sobbing, completely anguished over what his sexuality might mean for his job. Right behind him, however, a group of men are happily enjoying an energetic drag performance. The two scenes couldn't be more different, yet they are occurring right next to each other. This choice—to exhibit the good and the bad of this community—acts as an antidote for stereotyping and homophobia, because it does

not distill gay culture down to its flamboyant drag performances, nor to its loneliness or experiences of discrimination. The gay bar is the ideal site in which to show the variety and complexity of queer experiences, and Carow has tapped into this for a well-rounded depiction of this community.

### The Shortcomings of “Diversity”

Although Carow has succeeded in portraying a multifaceted and varied representation of homosexual experience, this depiction can only barely be termed “diversity,” because it primarily encapsulates the experiences of cisgender, homosexual, white men. Any queer characters outside of this group are lucky to have a handful of lines at most. The comprehensive list includes Charlotte von Mahlsdorf and the unnamed lesbian woman, along with a second, silent lesbian character and a single Black man whose role is to be beat up on a train. Considering the context in which this film was produced, this lack of any substantial diversity is unsurprising, and the diversity that it does have is impressive. Nonetheless, the perspectives of transgender individuals, queer women, genderqueer people, BIPOC, and all other sexual, racial, and gender minorities are essential to this dialogue of LGBTQ+ lived experience. Having had a few more decades of LGBTQ+ activism under our belts, it is past time to center our narratives around individuals with more than one oppressed identity.

### Conclusion

Directly after *Coming Out*’s premiere, East Germany entered a period of transformative change that would result in the end of the GDR as an independent nation. In the 30 years since reunification, Germany has navigated countless political and economic challenges, and has also



made significant progress in the realm of rights for the LGBTQ+ community. Louise Davidson-Schmich reports that “By 2015, [...] the Federal Republic had come to legalise same-sex partnerships, accepted openly homosexual military officers, and banned discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation,” and has become “a leader in lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender rights” (534-5). However, since 2015, hate crimes against members of the LGBTQ+ community in Germany have been on the rise, with 351 committed in 2018, 94 of which involved violence (Engelke 9). Where Germany used to be ranked third in the world for hate crime and hate speech, the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Intersex Association demoted the nation to number 23 in 2019 (Silk). One of the ways that these conditions could potentially be improved is through better and increased representation of the LGBTQ+ community.

Representation is a key factor on the path to widespread understanding and acceptance, but it must go beyond shallow depictions of queer stereotypes. Building on the foundation that Heiner Carow created in *Coming Out*, we must thoughtfully portray a variety of queer experiences and shift our focus to depict the most disenfranchised among us—namely, transgender individuals and LGBTQ+ people of color. By challenging heteronormativity in film and media today, we can strive toward a better future, where no one has to be afraid to be who they are.

# Works Cited

*Coming Out*. Dir. Heiner Carow. Perf. Matthias Freihof, Dirk Kummer, and Dagmar Manzel.

DEFA, 1989. Film.

Davidson-Schmich, Louise K. "LGBT Politics in Germany: Unification as a Catalyst for Change." *German Politics*, vol. 26, no. 4, 2017, pp. 534–55.

Dennis, David Brandon. "*Coming Out* into Socialism: Heiner Carow's Third Way." A *Companion to German Cinema*. 1st ed., Wiley-Blackwell, 2012.

Engelke, Hans-Georg. "Kleine Anfrage der Abgeordneten Doris Achelwilm u. a. und der Fraktion DIE LINKE: Behördlicher Umgang mit Hasskriminalität gegen LSBTIQ." Bundesministerium des Innern, für Bau und Heimat, 2019.

Frackman, Kyle. "The East German Film *Coming Out* (1989) as Melancholic Reflection and Hopeful Projection." *German Life and Letters*, vol. 71, no. 4, 2018, pp. 452–72, doi:10.1111/glal.12208.

Lemke, Jürgen. *Gay Voices from East Germany*. Indiana University Press, 1991.

McLellan, Josie. "Glad to be Gay Behind the Wall: Gay and Lesbian Activism in 1970s East Germany." *History Workshop Journal*, vol. 74, no. 74, Oxford University Press, 2012, pp. 105–30.

Silk, John and Elliot Douglas. "Attacks on LGBTQ+ People Increase in Germany." *Deutsche Welle*, 2019.